

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1426

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

CINCPAC

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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, MY

SUBJECT: INTERNAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS: PAS LEAVES NATIONAL FRONT

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 9259

B. KUALA LUMPUR 8545

1. SUMMARY. ON DEC. 17 THE PAN MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS) LEFT THE RULING NATIONAL FRONT (NF) COALITION AND RETURNED TO THE OPPOSITION AT THE PARLIAMENTARY AND STATE LEVELS. IN A SERIES OF COMPLICATED LEGALISTIC MANEUVERS, PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN SET UP CERTAIN CONDITIONS WHICH MEANT THAT AS OF THAT DATE PAS WOULD AUTOMATICALLY BE EXPELLED BY ITS OWN ACTIONS. HUSSEIN THUS PLACED AT LEAST PART OF THE ONUS OF SPLITTING MALAY POLITICAL UNITY ON THE SHOULDERS OF PAS LEADER DATUK ASRI MUDA. PAS' WITHDRAWAL FROM THE NF HAS

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HEIGHTENED RUMORS OF IMMINENT CABINET CHANGES

AND RENEWED SPECULATION ON EARLY ELECTIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. AS EXPECTED, AFTER ALL BUT ONE SENIOR PAS LEADER RESIGNED FROM THE CABINET IN THE WAKE OF THE KELANTAN EMERGENCY POWERS BILL (REFTEL B), PAS CARRIED OUT WHAT APPEARED TO BE A CALCULATED CAMPAIGN TO HARRASS THE

NF AND ESPECIALLY THE UNITED MALAYS NATIONAL ORIGANIZATION (UMNO), ALL THE WHILE PROTESTING ITS CONTINUING LOYALTY TO THE NF. THE MOST PROVOCATIVE ACTION WAS PAS' PERSISTANCE IN PRESSING FOR A NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE AGAINST THE MENTRI BESAR OF KEDAH (WHICH WAS DEFEATED DEC. 21) BUT PAS ALSO DECLARED ITS INTENTIONS TO CONTEST UMNO SEATS IN JOHORE IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS EVEN WHILE STILL IN THE NF AND KEPT UP ITS CRITICISM OF UMNO OVER THE KELANTAN SITUATION. TO DEAL WITH THIS INSUBORDINATION PM HUSSEIN ONN AS HEAD OF THE NF CALLED A SPECIAL NF SUPREME COUNCIL MEETING DEC 5 TO DECIDE" TO INTERPRET AN ARTICLE OF THE NF CONSTITUTION AS OBLIGING EACH CONSTITUENT PARTY TO EXPELL PARTY MEMBERS WHO VOTED AGAINST THE COALITION'S PARLIAMENTARY WHIP. THIS IN TURN WAS APPLIED RETROACTIVELY TO PAS, AND A SUBSEQUENT NF MEETING GAVE A DEC. 17 DEADLINE TO PASS TO EXPELL ITS MEMBERS (INCLUDING PARTY HEAD DATUK ASRI*) WHO HAD VOTED AGAINST THE KELANTAN EMERGENCY POWERS BILL IN PARLIAMENT NOV. 8. ON DEC. 14 ASRI DECLARED THAT PAS CONSIDERED ITSELF ALREADY EXPELLED, AND PAS POLITICIANS IN THE VARIOUS STATES BEGAN DISASSOCIATING THEMSELVES FROM NF COMMITTEES. ON DEC. 16 THE 13 PAS MP'S CROSSED OVER TO THE OPPOSITION SIDE OF PARLIAMENT, THEREBY FORMALIZING THE SPLIT.

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3. EVER SINCE THE KELANTAN CRISIS PAS' DEPARTURE FROM THE NF HAS BEEN WIDELY PREDICTED. THE ARCAN MANEUVERING SURROUNDING THIS AFFAIR IS KEYED TO THE NEXT PARLIAMENTARY AND STATE ELECTIONS, WHICH ARE EXPECTED IN 1978 AND WHICH PAS WILL NOW CONTEST FROM OUTSIDE THE NF IN HEAD-TO-HEAD COMPETITION WITH UMNO. SINCE MALAY UNITY IS TRADITIONALLY A KEY THEME IN PREDOMINANTLY MALAY RURAL CONSTITUENCIES BOTH PARTIES UNDOUBTEDLY WILL TRY TO BLAME THE OTHER FOR PAS' DIVORCE FROM THE NF.

4. THE DEPARTURE OF PAS FROM THE NF AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS, INCLUDING THE MINISTERIAL VACANCY CAUSED BY THE DEATH OF THE AGRICULTURE MINISTER IN THE DEC. 4 HIJACKING AND CRASH OF AN MAS AIRLINER, HAS HEATED UP RUMORS OF IMMINENT CABINET CHANGES AND RENEWED TALK OF ELECTIONS IN EARLY 1978. AT LEAST INTERIM CHANGES IN THE CABINET WILL BE NECESSARY TO FILL THE VACANCIES (TWO MINISTERSHIPS AND SEVERAL DEPUTY MINISTER AND PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY POSITIONS), AND THERE SEEMS TO BE A GROWING CONCENSUS AMONG OBSERVERS THAT EARLY ELECTIONS ARE NECESSARY TO

SETTLE DOWN THE POLITICAL SITUATION. WITH PAS NOW
THE MAIN ELECTORAL THREAT TO THE NF, JUDGEMENTS ABOUT
THAT PARTY'S READINESS TO COMPETE WILL PLAY A MAJOR
ROLE IN DETERMINING WHEN ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD.
IF PM HUSSEIN FEELS THAT PAS' FINANCIAL POSITION
IS WEAK AND THE PARTY IS DISORGANIZED OVER THE
DECISION TO LEAVE THE NF HE MAY WELL DECIDE TO
HOLD THE ELECTION AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE.

5. COMMENT. THE DEPARTURE OF PAS FROM THE NF AND
THE APPROACH OF ELECTIONS WILL CERTAINLY ENLIVEN
MALAYSIAN POLITICS, BUT WE DOUBT THIS WILL HAVE A
SERIOUS DESTABILIZING EFFECT ON THE BASIC POWER
STRUCTURE. PAS WAS IN THE OPPOSITION FROM ITS
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FOUNDING IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE FEDERATION UNTIL
IT JOINED THE GOVERNMENT IN 1973 AND WAS A CUSTOMARY
SOURCE OF RIGHT-WING CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT
POLICIES. RESUMPTION OF SUCH VOCAL MALAY NATIONALIST
CUM FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAMIC OPPOSITION WILL, HOWEVER,
FORCE A CERTAIN CAUTION ON THE GOM, BOTH IN
DOMESTIC DECISIONS WHICH COULD BE INTERPRETED AS
NEGLECTING THE INTERESTS OF THE MALAYS, AND IN
RELATIONS WITH THAILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES (PAS
HAS LONG BEEN A STAUNCH DEFENDER OF THE MUSLIM
MINORITIES IN BOTH COUNTRIES--SEE REFTTEL A).
MILLER

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